



Education, secularism, and illiberalism: Marginalisation of Muslims by the French state

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Abstract

Laïcité, France's idiosyncratic principle of secularism, is a unique term that today engenders state forms of illiberalism, especially against marginalised communities in France. French Muslims experience instances of discrimination and 'othering' as the state endorses illiberal policies in the name of laïcité. These state acts of symbolic violence transgress political geographies and affect French Muslims' perceptions of identification, citizenship, and belonging. Building on nine interviews with French Muslim higher education students, this article demonstrates ways in which illiberalism operates in the lives of French Muslim higher education students. It identifies the role of the French secular school in the making of gendered Islamophobia. This article serves as means for better understanding the lived experiences of French Muslims and recognising the socio-political changes that need to be made in France to protect and empower marginalised groups against state illiberalism.

Keywords

France, French Islam, Islam, *laïcité*, Muslim women, public education, secularism

Introduction

Rooted in its colonial and imperial histories, a Republican secularist tradition, and national constructions of authority, France's rhetoric around Muslims arguably signifies the rise of an illiberal liberal democracy where the revolutionary ideals of *liberté*, *égalité*, and *fraternité* are applied unequally across France's various ethno-cultural and religious groups (Asad, 2006; Balibar, 2013). In many instances, non-conformity to French cultural idealism of a secular citizenship is linked to the failure of a long-standing French assimilationist project to achieve what theorist Benedict Anderson (2006) terms an imagined community, a socially constructed narrative for a nation-state. To maintain an idealised Republican strain of cultural homogeneity, France has deployed illiberal

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tools that infringe on citizens' and minorities' rights. Education systems reflect these larger institutional governance practices and often encourage assimilation – the adoption of behaviours by targeted minority groups – thus lending themselves to directing systemic violence against marginalised communities through the very actors meant to 'equalize' and 'liberate' them (Hirsch, 2010; Lizotte, 2020). From this perspective, the nation-state's illiberalism in education becomes a novel lens to understand the effects of state structures, such as *laïcité*, on minority groups. This research focuses on the role of *laïcité* as a form of state illiberalism – defined here as the institutional curtailing of civil liberties as described by Étienne Balibar (2013) in relation to 'equaliberty' – that has negative outcomes for French Muslim higher education (HE) students.

What is *laïcité*?

Laïcité is a constitutional principle of the French Republic referring to secularism as foundational in society. While there is no satisfactory English translation of *laïcité*, its major difference from Anglo-Saxon secularism is its strict separation of church and state. *Laïcité*'s genesis stems from the French populace's attempts to escape from the grips of Catholic rule, which controlled France's kings and society. Evolving through various forms via the *Edict of Nantes* and the *Declaration of Rights and Man*, *laïcité* approached its modern form in the 1880s under Napoleon's Concordat system. In this system of religious pluralism, France inched towards secularism through modifying its education system. A series of laws, known as the Jules Ferry Laws, built the foundations for a secular society through erecting teacher training colleges and mandating free, compulsory, and secular public education (Jansen, 2006). The trifecta of professional competence, free education, and secularism created a perfect constellation of pressures for the development of a secular-minded society, while also simultaneously establishing the *école républicaine* as an important site for *laïcité*'s regulation and securitisation (Lizotte, 2020). These aims were achieved through national educational discourses that homogenised social differences and promoted a universalistic conception of civic morality. As such, one could argue that this universalist scope also functions as a tool of bureaucratic regulation of its citizens and promotes an assimilationist project supporting *laïcité*, while incorporating other national ideals such as language and culture (Freedman, 2004). Approximately a generation later, today's *laïcité* came into being with the passage of the 1905 Law concerning the Separation of Church and State. Passed in the heated atmosphere of the Dreyfus Affair, anti-Semitism, and ideological struggles between secularist republicans and conservative Catholic nationalists, the 1905 Law ended the Concordat system, removed Catholicism from its favoured position, and inaugurated the modern French secular era (de Wit, 2014; Kelly, 2017).

While *laïcité*'s essence has been maintained since the 1905 Law, its true test came during the 1980s' societal debates over Muslims wearing headscarves in schools. This conflict culminated in the 2003 Stasi Report, which offered a forum for discussion on how *laïcité* would take shape in a modern, multicultural French society. While religious attire in and of itself is not contrary to *laïcité* outside of the school, the Commission found that in classrooms, it should be considered a vector for proselytism and a disruption to education's tranquillity. The major symbolic markers of religious affiliation named by the Commission represented different religious groups, including *kippas*, large crosses, and headscarves (Stasi, 2003). The resulting report gave the near-unanimous opinion that a law banning religious signs in schools should be passed, instigating an interventionist, secularising project that rivalled political liberalism (Daly, 2010). This is most clearly seen by how the Commission promoted *laïcité* in terms of gender equality. The Commission's findings homed in on the headscarf's role in Islam, which, on one hand, was found to be completely compatible with the Republic; on the other hand, however, it was arguably used to promote sexist acts,

derogatory language, and violence against Muslim women (Stasi, 2003). This state conflict ultimately led to the 2004 'Headscarf Law' banning religious attire from schools. Thus, the 2004 Law amplified discussions around *laïcité* in French society, codified assimilationist secularism, and marked a sovereign intervention over the construction of headscarves as a symbolic demarcation of Islam (Freedman, 2004; Salvatore, 2013). While claiming to be neutral – and despite originally opposing the Pope's political grasp – *laïcité* had taken on what Laborde (2009) terms 'Catholaïcité', a bias towards France's ingrained Catholic history. Moreover, it facilitated a stepping-stone to another 'Muslim' controversy: the burqa. In 2010, France passed a law outlawing clothing that conceals one's face in public. This law garnered international attention and became known as the Burqa Ban due to the law's disproportionate effect on Muslim women. Bringing us into the present day, this brief history of *laïcité* points to the significance of secularisation in French society, its relationship with the Republican state, and its instrumentalisation for the creation of an imagined, utopic state free from religion and associated culture – or, as Wendy Brown (2011; Brown et al., 2015) would argue, state 'toleration' of religious diversity providing it remains hidden.

Laïcité, Islam, and gender

There is a wealth of literature on *laïcité*'s relationship with Islam and the negative consequences recent laws have had on Muslims. Islamophobia in France and its linkages with secularism across Europe (Carland, 2011; Doyle, 2011, 2013; Goldberg, 2006; Martínez-Ariño and Griera, 2020) demonstrate that France's secular laws are driven by underlying Islamophobic ideals as a part of the state's illiberal tendencies to control religious institutions. The political arguments and debates concerning *laïcité* and its legal manifestations, such as the 2004 and 2010 laws, have been thoroughly explored as a part of this larger pattern (Asad, 2006; Barras, 2010; Baubérot, 2009; Galember and de Raillard, 2014; Hancock, 2008, 2015; Raymond, 2009; Weill, 2006).

In particular, existing research demonstrates that Muslim women represent a gendered and racialised category in the eyes of the French state as a consequence of *laïcité*. In both the public and private spheres, they are simultaneously viewed as victims of paternalism and victimisers for freely choosing to wear the veil, as well as seen as symbols of *communautarisme*, proselytism, and Muslim misogyny (Gaudin, 2016; Lizotte, 2020) in what Teeple Hopkins (2015) coins 'sexist Islamophobia'. It has been further documented how Islam operates as a racialised identity inscribed on Muslims' bodies through the hegemonic banning of headscarves (Davidson, 2012; Hancock, 2015; Hancock and Mobillion, 2019; Limage, 2000; Rootham, 2015), an institution which Secor (2002) refers to as 'regimes of veiling'. Furthermore, research demonstrates that the veil plays a symbolic role in individual-state and community-state dynamics over *laïcité*'s role in socio-political power distribution, the politics of identification, and the politics of embodiment (Adam-Troian et al., 2019; Adrian, 2009; Easat-Daas, 2017; Jansen, 2006; Selby, 2011; Werbner, 2007).

In addition, what Kearney and Taylor (2005) describe as a 'sacrificial stranger' offers an insight into national imaginaries of categorisation, where the 'stranger' to the nation operates as a metric for belonging. In France, Muslims represent this 'sacrificial stranger' who are seen as needing assimilation to comply with a standard norm of Frenchness deriving from national parochialisms that presume Europeans to be White Christians (Goldberg, 2006). Literature has demonstrated that this assimilationist paradigm has a tendency to homogenise Muslim populations – despite their ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity – as a singular outsider who needs to continually assimilate (Allen, 2010; Easat-Daas, 2017; Roy, 2005; Salih, 2004; Vanparys et al., 2013), in a process that Grillo (2004) refers to as 'transethnicization', where Muslims from diverse backgrounds are amalgamated into a singular *musulman français* community.

Illiberalism and equaliberty

In reflecting upon how these politics of identification and citizenship are experienced by French Muslims, this research's conceptual framework has been influenced by Étienne Balibar's (2013) evaluation of illiberalism in liberal democracies. According to Balibar (2013), liberalism in action can often represent, albeit uniquely, illiberal forms of authoritarian political practice:

Liberal principles are not necessarily accompanied by liberal practices; to the contrary, nothing is more common than an authoritarian or discriminatory practice of liberalism [. . .] [Authoritarian liberalism] seeks to control with one hand what it frees with the other. (p. 228)

Balibar (2013) illustrates this through what he coins 'equaliberty': the theory that equality and liberty are codependent because any suppression of freedom implies an inequality of freedom. Although equaliberty presents itself as a simple conflation, Balibar asserts that there is a second dimension of antithetical mediators: fraternity and property. In this case, fraternity can evolve into nationalism while property can evolve into possessive individualism, both of which, if not kept in check, can chip away at equaliberty.¹ Therefore, these two mediators are required to keep equaliberty functioning; otherwise, illiberalism, and the negative consequences that arise from it, expands in society. Within the context of this research, Balibar's equaliberty serves as a theoretical illustration of how discrimination emerges through state practices of illiberalism. As such, it will be used as a conceptual tool to signal that reductions of liberty – often linked with over-impositions of fraternity – necessarily trigger reductions in equality, and vice versa.

Drawing on the experiences of nine French Muslim HE students collected through interviews, this article will delineate the notions of belonging and state illiberalism within the context of *laïcité* in French education. The article begins by assessing the French principle of *fraternité* against participants' racialised and gendered experiences. It then narrows in scope and comments on how the French education system may be described as what Michel Foucault (2004) terms 'heterotopia'. This is followed by a discussion of how Muslim students feel seen (or not seen) on university campuses. Finally, the article will conclude with remarks on how further research into illiberalism in the state and discrimination is needed to understand how marginalised communities experience and are negatively impacted by state structures such as *laïcité*.

Methods

This research's arguments are drawn from semi-structured interviews conducted online from March to April 2020 with French Muslims. The interviews were structured thematically around identity and citizenship within the French state, drawing on the notions of cultural identity (Hall, 1990, 2017), cultural citizenship (Rosaldo, 1994), and national legitimisation (Asad, 2006; Spivak, 1988, 2014). The thematically oriented base questions served as starting points for creating more fluid conversations, most often being tailored to prompt discussions about experiences of discrimination or to move on from conversational dead ends. Given the importance the participants placed on the relationship between school and *laïcité*, questions around experiences of *laïcité* and linked discrimination were more frequent than initially anticipated. In addition, while COVID-19 was not a research focus, participant references to France's lockdown and restrictions were commonplace.

The interview methods drew on the ethical principles underlying ethnographic approaches to enrich the research's qualitative methodology. While this study's interviews could not seek to fully understand the complexities of participants' experiences to the same level as an ethnography,

ethnographic literature inspired methods for reflection around researcher–participant relationships. For example, Rosaldo (1993, 1994) and Said's (1979) calls to be sensitive to the representation of the 'other' were centralised in this research's design. Furthermore, various works concerned with ethnographic authority and representation in research (Britzman, 1995; Clifford, 1983; Reyes, 2020), reflexivity (Agee, 2009; Meloni, 2020; Noh, 2019; Pillow, 2003, 2015; Uddin, 2011), and the politics of knowledge production (Bacevic, 2019; Bruff and Tansel, 2019) provided insight into the research steps necessary to reduce the researcher's subjectivities.

Originally, interviews were to be centralised in-person around Paris; however, due to concerns over COVID-19 travel restrictions and transmission, the research plans were altered. Conducting research virtually proved to be advantageous as additional participants were recruited due to the increased flexibility of online interviews when compared to the time and location restrictions linked with project funding; however, this methodology also created a potential barrier, given the physical separation of the researcher and participants and the visual limitations of laptop screens. Participants could not physically share their stories, neighbourhoods, and universities, and as a consequence, some intended ethnographic tools could not be adequately implemented, likely impacting the quality, proximity, and nature of the researcher–participant relationships. Future studies seeking to conduct digital ethnographies should be prepared to be innovative in overcoming these barriers to better understand participants' experiences from their point of view.

In total, nine individual interviews were conducted with students between the ages of 20 and 25 years. All students were enrolled in a form of tertiary education, ranging from BTS² to post-graduate programmes. The research focuses on French Muslim HE students' narratives as a way of better understanding the intersection between education as a French national institution and young Muslims' experiences of otherness within these institutions. In addition, a better understanding of how illiberalism operates in the lives of French Muslim HE students is gained from engaging with their stories, as this topic is still an underexplored issue in the educational literature on exclusion. The participants were recruited via posts in various Facebook groups for Muslim French university students. The interviews were conducted predominately in French and lasted around 1 hour. Despite the small sample size, participants covered a range of socio-economic backgrounds, hometowns, HE disciplines, and ethnic backgrounds. The sample size was mostly female, which engendered conversations about discrimination towards Muslim women, such as headscarf removal. For this reason, gender-based discrimination plays a considerable role in discussions around state illiberalism.

Finally, the data were anonymised and thematically analysed, especially using the notions of illiberalism and equaliberty. Since many participants expressed participatory interest, a penultimate draft was shared as a form of member checking. Their responses helped to clarify certain experiences, culminating in minor modifications to the researcher's dissertation.

National tools of illiberalism: *fraternité*, education, and *liberté d'expression*

Fraternité: infrapolitical violence against women

Already, being a woman is difficult. So being a Maghrebi woman, it's a bit more difficult. But being a Muslim and Maghrebi woman, it is two times more difficult. (Myriam, participant)

Fraternité is translated as brotherhood, the masculine embodiment of French unity. This masculine unity weighs heavily on the Western conception of womanhood, designating what Rosaldo (1994) names as second-class citizenship for those who do not assimilate to French

womanhood. Stemming from the racialisation of the veil, this illiberal notion traps diverse women into a conception of gender which may not accord with their own religious commitments and affiliations, essentially stripping them of their rights. France interprets this womanhood as allowing citizens to escape imagined perceptions of tyrannical Islam in which subordinate women are deprived of their freedom of expression. In practice, this 'liberation' from an amalgamated form of Islam comes at the price of reducing Muslim women's rights to a form of second-class citizenship when compared to other non-Muslim women. In other words, France's attempts to 'liberate' women demonstrate how destabilised fraternity affects equaliberty: reducing religious liberty reduces equality. This illiberal push for conformity to French womanhood is expressed by Fatima, a veiled student:

It bothers me a lot when people speak to us as if all these laws are made to free us while we are very, very free as we are. Wearing [the headscarf] is our freedom and so is not taking it off. It is incomprehensible for them. Even with people, friends I know, I'm often asked if I wear it by choice. It's like they're there as a savior, as if I never wore it by choice . . .

This experience is echoed by other participants and is a clear example of what Said (1979) described as repressive cultural representations of the East by the imperial. For example, in direct reference to French colonialism in the Maghreb, Lamia noted White men's exoticism of veiled women and their desire to control women's bodies:

[In French paintings of hammams] you have Arab women just laying with their luscious hair and beautiful breasts and whatever. So, then, there was this frustration, I think historically, of men not getting access to those women because they were veiled by their fathers, by their brothers and whatever, and they just can't get access to them. And I feel like this frustration still exists to this day. They look at veiled women like 'I can't see your boobs'. This bothers me.

Lamia, in later reflection on this quote, further expanded the following:

[Men] still cannot get access to Muslim and veiled women the same way they can with other women [in] France. The way they speak in the media about Muslim veiled women to this day seems like this [lack of access] irritates them deeply.

Through Lamia's contextualisation, it is understood that French society's desire to unveil women is rooted in colonial adventurism and oriental exoticism. This itself is based on the Western conceptual misunderstanding of the headscarf. In the remainder of this section, the manifestations of this unequal balance and misunderstanding are explored.

Western cultural representations of the headscarf and Islam reduce the complexities of culture in the Muslim world and confound religious practices with ethno-cultural practices, which can be either exclusive of or conditional upon Islam. This occidental misunderstanding perpetuates racialisation of the headscarf and frustrates Muslim women, such as Myriam and Odile. For Myriam, originally the headscarf was an expression of culture linked with her Algerian heritage and personal identity, but now viewed it as something 'forcefully linked to Islam'. In a different vein, Odile remarked that when she originally started wearing a headscarf, she only occasionally wore it as it was culturally linked to Mayotte. At a certain point, her thinking evolved, and she decided to wear her headscarf full time to be modest, seeing the headscarf as both cultural and religious. When people do not understand this reasoning, Odile remarked that cultural disconnects emerged, meaning that Muslim women did not know where they stood in society. Even in instances where wearing the headscarf was undoubtedly religious, the participants noted that

how religious rules apply to Muslim women is misunderstood in Western ‘liberal’ cultures. For Fatima,

It comes from religion because it’s religion that supports these modesties. I could put a plastic bag on my head . . . it’s not for show, it’s a freedom of faith. I want to say that it’s just a rule that I feel able to apply to myself and with which I agree.

The masculine grounding of the French imaginary thus conflates the wearing of the headscarf with ‘oppressive’ Islam, leading to its politicisation and condemnation in France through what Karima calls a ‘strategy’: the 2004 Headscarf law. This law reflects Balibar’s (2013) notion of infrapolitical violence, a violence that the state refuses to see as political but places at the heart of the political institutions of citizenship and belonging. This infrapolitical violence demonstrates equaliberty as freedoms and equality are simultaneously reduced. This law claims to be non-political in the name of *laïcité* but, in reality, it creates a kind of politicised neo-colonial control over Muslim women. This control can be seen as a form of symbolic violence emanating from the entrenched White fraternity that personifies the French state. Lamia notes that it is almost always ‘white men without a faith’ who are given the power to discuss how certain communities wear religious accessories. This control over women’s bodies stems from men’s lack of understanding that ‘freedom [for] women is telling her “you do you”’. Lamia terms this masculine nationalism as a form of ‘*liberticide*’: enforcing freedoms to the point of destroying them. This engenders forms of illiberalisation, where equaliberty is destabilised by gendered idealisations of citizenship inherent to *fraternité*.

Therefore, in participants’ experiences, France’s weaponisation of *fraternité* is a neo-imperial control over Muslim women and their rights that stems from misunderstanding the headscarf and other forms of womanhood. This abuse of fraternity decreases the equaliberty of French Muslim women because, as Hall (2017) argues, the universalist ideal of equality is a binary form of assimilationist particularisation which leads to the exclusion of Muslim women from its universalisms.

Heterotopic education: crisis of the headscarf

Western conceptions of gender and *fraternité* are not just apparent in French society; they are reinforced by state attempts to create a citizenry loyal to its values. The school is an institutional vessel of the nation’s cultural politics and, as a purposeful space localised at the foundations of occidental society, it embodies the nation-state’s desire to bring its youth under one roof to create ‘Utopias of Citizenship’ (Balibar, 2013). Foucault (2004) names these spaces ‘heterotopias’ because they are spaces where forms of nationalism create spaces of ‘difference’ and legitimacy. In drawing upon the participants’ entwined experiences of culture and identity as it relates to the French education system, Foucault’s ‘heterotopia’ provides an excellent illustration of how France’s education system has been regulated in ways that create a cultural notion of collective Frenchness that reduces, as equaliberty proscribes, the liberty to have ‘differences’ and equality of ‘differences’ against the ‘legitimate’.

Foucault (2004) purports that each heterotopia carries its own function which is contingent upon the history of the society which creates it: the ‘hetero’ of the French school utopia operates unlike those in many other parts of the world. Its differences derive from the fact that French schools combine Foucault’s crisis and deviation heterotopias: Heterotopias of crisis signal spaces where things happen for those in crisis, while heterotopias of deviation are institutions where we place individuals outside of the norm. In fact, this is how schools function: you put those in a stage

of crisis, the period before and during adolescence, in a position where they feel that they, or their actions, can be perceived as deviant if they do not conform to the societal norm established by the school. This is directly linked to a nationally constructed curriculum that only conceives of knowledge as grounded in normative national history. Nasir, for example, commented the following:

I think [my French identity] is from education. In the end, we all have the same curriculum in France. [. . .] I think we all learn the same things in France, more or less. It gives us a common foundation for advancing in society.

This is especially important because the school acts as a bridge between the private home and society, between idiosyncratic families and the homogeneous state ethos. As explained by Salim,

When we live [in *banlieues*] we don't know what being a citizen is. [. . .] the only times we become aware of it is at school during lessons. We are told you have the right to this, the right to that.

So, the only time youth 'in crisis' are exposed to the French ethos is through the school system. These 'deviant' youth can then be transformed through centralised education into the imagined ideal citizens desired by the state. In addition, for those who are minoritised, their 'deviation' through markers such as race, religion, and gender means they are left feeling 'out of place' at school through forces of exclusion and inclusion. For Alice, this means that 'we are made to feel like an "other"', a clear form of exclusion that promotes behaviour modification and reduces the equaliberty young people experience. Even before she fully converted to being Muslim, Alice sometimes wore a headscarf in a non-religious manner to her BTS classes and was immediately labelled as an 'other' and told to remove it repeatedly. This is what Balibar (2013) terms neutralisation: the state, realising that school cannot simply be neutral itself as it is a nominally public space, must claim school space as neutral space to reign in 'deviant' youth 'in crisis'. And oftentimes, the only way to do this is by creating what Foucault describes as a heterotopia of purification.

For Foucault, a heterotopia of purification is a space which is both isolated and easily accessible. In the case of the school, students are required to attend the institution, which is largely segregated from the public and their families. Upon entering the institution, students are required to make concessions, which range from adopting standard French to removing religious attire that goes against the school's secular principles. These concessions act as purifiers, ridding youth 'in crisis' of traits considered deviant to the French state, and as illiberal tools, demonstrating equaliberty through the linked reduction of freedoms and equality. This purification strategy emphasises the symbolic power of clothing and how the state regulates citizenship. With the stated goal of defending women against religious fundamentalism, the French state offers Muslim women two choices: take off the veil or face banishment from the school until the 'fault' is fixed. This exclusion would be, counterintuitively, pushing the girls towards the alleged spaces of religious sexism that the French state is fighting (Balibar, 2013). This exclusive practice forces veiled woman to make a choice: their veil – a potentially intrinsic part of their identity – or knowledge – a potential gateway for success in a society where success is already limited by structural and social discrimination.

Ultimately, the participants acknowledged that taking off the veil for school was the only viable option. For example, Alice explains, 'I reveal myself in classes because I have no choice, because getting a diploma is important'. This concession, however, has clear negative trade-offs. Oftentimes, these women felt they had experienced a form of systematic, social violence: humiliation. For

these women, the classic nightmare trope of showing up to school naked is brought to life by the state. Alice equated removing her headscarf to undressing in front of her classmates. For Karima, ‘removing your veil like that, it’s very humiliating’. In attempts to at least partially cover themselves, some girls chose to wear *bandeaux*, large headbands, yet even in these instances, the school sometimes policed students to ensure conformity. In Karima’s case, school officials told her classmates that a *bandeau* covering more than 5 cm would be considered ‘islamique’ and therefore not allowed. Arguably this attempt by the school to purify the secular institution represents infrapolitical violence as it leads to humiliation for those who wish to embody their own religious cultural forms, which counterintuitively perpetuates the heterotopic feelings of crisis and deviancy. Odile provided a clear illustration of this when she was called out for wearing her headscarf:

At the end of the course, [the director] asked me to come and see her. I thought she wanted to see my notebook. I was very stressed because my notebook was poorly kept. Instead, she wanted to ask me to take off my headscarf because, in the context of secularism at school, I was not allowed to wear it. I never made any comments. I never had a problem with my high school [. . .] In Réunion, we were left to wear our scarf, especially since, for Mahorais, wearing a headscarf is cultural. But she asked me to take it off and made a speech explaining why I am taking it off for secularism. [. . .] To completely ban it was eliminatory and it bothered me.

As seen, the concession of removing certain articles of clothing for admission into a state institution that citizens are required to attend underscores the weaponisation of the school for the state’s assimilationist goals and its illiberal reduction in terms of equaliberty, especially given the effects of fraternal undertones on equality. These barriers – in the name of an educational utopia – accentuate how the French education system undermines its own citizens’ ability to forge a culturally relevant citizenship and to belong in a participatory social democracy (Rosaldo, 1994). Each student, viewed as a ‘deviant in crisis’ by the state, must conform to the school’s mandatory entry barriers, or otherwise be excluded from opportunities for success. In doing so, the state reduces the status of Muslims – especially women – and consequently reinforces an exclusive imaginary of the French state where heterotopic education is an institutional value regulator.

Being seen and legitimised: proselytism and backroom prayer at university

After high school, students can leave the heterotopic state school and seek out HE opportunities. HE, for many participants, represented a more open space than state schools due to two factors: the right to wear religious attire and the student body’s diversity. Yet, this increased freedom of expression and diversity does not imply that Muslims achieved equality with their peers. On the contrary, the state’s atheist bias is still clear through the students’ and universities’ reproduction of the heterotopic system via the ostracisation of Muslims. While officially there are no laws restricting headscarves (yet) at French universities, recent controversies surrounding the headscarf at universities have triggered proposals for legislation outright banning the headscarf or limiting religious expressions on university campuses. As a consequence of these discussions to reduce religious freedoms – and thus equality as suggested by equaliberty – participants expressed dismay to their experiences of discrimination.

First, for Karima, being able to wear the veil at university gave her the impression that she could actually dress how she wanted; however, this does not mean that the university represented a utopia for her as exclusionary experiences still led to profound feelings of second-class citizenship. For instance, Karima experienced a negative encounter at the university gym with an instructor:

Taking my [student] card he said, 'you, you there! The veil. . . are you sure that it's authorized?' [. . .] [I replied,] 'Yes, I am sure it's allowed'. [. . .] They put in the rules to not wear anything that could hinder activity, that could compromise security, etc. and, in fact, it's used a little bit abusively.

This instructor later, after allowing her to wear the veil, tried to explain to Karima what the Qur'an says about the veil. For Karima, this experience was symbolically violent because she no longer felt safe in the space. Further examples of symbolic violence were the leering and staring that Muslim women experienced when wearing the veil. For Yasmine, the looks she received for her veil made her feel like an 'alien' on campus. These 'bizarre' and 'violent' stares became so psychologically damaging that she skipped school and fell behind. Even in class, she felt like all eyes were on her, as if she was projected on the screen. During one of Yasmine's lectures on the United States since 9/11, her British professor spoke about terrorism and 'stared at me the whole time', causing her to leave the course as quickly as possible. This demonstrates a practical applicability of equaliberty's premise that a reduction of liberty leads to a reduction of equality because this symbolic violence reduced her freedom to wear a veil and her equality within a university space. Therefore, while participants overall felt universities to be more open and diverse, experiences of symbolic violence enforced a heterotopic interpretation of *laïcité* on their sense of belonging.

Second, while allowing religious attire, French universities still carry out the state's atheist *laïcité*. France declares itself a liberal democracy with *liberté d'expression*, but there is a caveat: this expression must not endanger public order. The term 'public order' can thus be construed to be both physical (public space) and imaginary (collective values), where the state polices this freedom and applies it through *laïcité*. The determination of 'danger' is therefore subject to state atheist bias and manipulation. For example, Nasir described the 2004 law as not refusing all religions, but rather 'adopting the principles of people who don't believe'. It marked religion as dangerous to public order and thus raised the question of whether religious equality – and thus religious freedom, as suggested by equaliberty – really exists, particularly in relation to Islam. The state does not, however, desire to be perceived as illiberal, as that would be antithetical to the utopian view of citizenship it seeks to energise. Therefore, the state needs an adversary to justify its actions. For *laïcité*, the state names proselytism – a proxy for religion – as a danger to the public good. For the participants, being accused of proselytism was a worry when wearing the veil, wanting to pray, or speaking about religion in public, to the point where they felt dissuaded from certain religious actions. According to Karima,

There are others who say that secularism started [. . .] under the guise of protecting religion when, in fact, they want to eradicate [religion] from the public space. [. . .] It's really only religion at home. Religion in public spaces is proselytism, it is forcing you to join a religion. It's really delirious.

In more concrete examples, Fatima avoids discussing religion except with close friends as she has the impression it would be poorly received and Salim noted that despite his desire to do so, he would not pray on campus since it is viewed as proselytism. Given that spaces designated for prayer are forbidden, students seeking to meet their religious obligations are forced to move 'underground' to pray and express themselves. At each of the institutions Karima attended, students would pray in back staircases or fire escapes because – despite the fact that the student body generally did not care – there was fear that it could be problematic with the university administration. While in theory *laïcité* applies to all religions, the reaction to prayer in public spaces seems targeted at the Muslim community. This is a form of internal exclusion, a situation where the excluded

(Muslims) cannot be fully accepted as equal citizens having the right to *liberté d'expression* (Balibar, 2013). The reduction of freedom experienced by the Muslim community, when compared to the state's atheist bias, necessarily undermines Muslim's levels of political equality.

Thus, discrimination's normalisation and trivialisation by the state represents the pinnacle of what it means to be Muslim in a state of internal exclusion produced by racialised and exacerbated imaginaries of homogeneity and unity (Balibar, 2013). Given that such instances of discrimination were commonplace at university, French Muslim students felt unable to fully exercise their *liberté d'expression* for fear of being seen as proselytising in public spaces, negatively affecting their experiences in HE. Their religious freedoms and equalities were thus reduced concurrently by the state's desire to police public spaces.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article explored the French state's illiberal incursions on French Muslims' rights through its employment of *fraternité*, education, and *liberté d'expression*. Trapped as an 'other' in state illiberal structures – such as the heterotopic education system – participants articulated experiences of discrimination, humiliation, and subjugation as a consequence of their racialised and stigmatised Muslimness. They voiced state revocation of personal liberties, especially in regard to religion, that reduced them to second-class citizens within society in an example of Balibar's (2013) equaliberty. Especially for women, who are targeted by the state for the corporeal act of wearing the veil, the feeling of not belonging appeared as a result of the state's attempts to promote Western womanhood. While this institutionalised relegation to second-class citizenship is alleviated in some forms upon transition to HE, certain aspects still remain, ensuring conformity to an imaginary, idealised Frenchness. This imaginary forces us to rethink the conceptions of womanhood, education, and freedom of expression within the confines of the French state. In reflecting upon these experiences, one might conclude that the French state and society exercise illiberal ideals and are far from Balibar's ideal equaliberty, constantly perpetuating symbolic violence against French Muslims. This thus leaves us questioning links between equaliberty and identity: Who is French? What does it mean to be French? And finally, by extension, whose freedoms and equalities are bolstered or reduced by their Frenchness?

From this, we can recognise that the experiences of French Muslims are part of a growing pulse of illiberalism both in France and across other societies. This endangers Muslim expressions of identity, as well expressions by other communities deemed 'other' due to their race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or other forms of being. Therefore, while this article has amplified participants' voices regarding frustrations and experiences of discrimination, questions remain of when the threshold of symbolic and physical violence towards Muslims will be breached and when large-scale discontent with society's subjugation of Muslims will be protested en masse, much like with the experiences of Black people in many countries today. Moving forward, this research demonstrates the continued necessity of amplifying the voices of marginalised peoples and proliferating knowledge around the mistreatment of 'subaltern' populations within Western society, as this French illiberalism is just one example of a global pattern of neo-colonial and neo-imperial structures that, until eradicated, will continue to cause pain and injustices for marginalised communities across the globe (Fanon, 1963; Hall, 2017).

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Notes

1. Balibar's hypothesis reads as follows: 'The equation of freedom and equality is indispensable to the modern, subjective remaking of right, but it is powerless to guarantee its institutional stability. A mediation is required, but it takes the antithetical forms of fraternity (or community) and property (or commerce)' (Balibar, 2013: 52).
2. BTS is a vocational or professional education course that is considered a post-bac level but is still held on high school campuses. As such, even though the students are college aged and being educated at a tertiary level, they are still bound by the high school's rules and regulations.

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